

Children have always helped their families with a full range of domestic tasks. During colonial times, children worked on family farms and in craft shops in Philadelphia and other growing towns. But the beginning of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century transformed children's work as Pennsylvania's industries proved vital to the economic growth of the nation. Like adults, children would work for wages in demanding and sometimes dangerous jobs.

From the early 1800s, children were an integral part of the textile industry's work force. In the Manayunk district of Philadelphia, children as young as seven assisted in the spinning and weaving of cotton and woolen goods. By 1828, nearly half of Manayunk's one thousand laboring residents were children under the age of fifteen. In nearby Kensington, children labored as bobbin boys and girls from sunrise to sunset earning one dollar per week. Exhausted at the end of the work day, some slept in doorways and alleys near the mills. Philadelphia's 1820 census found that 40 percent of the eleven hundred workers employed in some thirty nine textile firms were children.

Pittsburgh's textile industry relied on child labor. One factory owner employed numerous children under the age of twelve, with the youngest being eight. They worked eleven or twelve hours per day, six days a week, earning a weekly wage of one dollar. According to a Pittsburgh school teacher, factory labor "deprived many children of the ability to read and write." In



Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, African American children, who were seldom hired for more desirable textile jobs, worked as chimney sweeps and performed other tasks to earn money.

Across the state, boys were employed to carry water to workers who dug canal beds, run errands for engineers and contractors, and drive horses and mules. Boys were less expensive than adults and freed canal workers to per-

form more complex tasks. Since such jobs were in demand, management for the Pennsylvania Canal advertised that it would employ only "stout, industrious boys."

In 1834, delegates to the National Trades Union meeting in New York called for federal and state legislation to ban child labor. By late 1837 senators in the Pennsylvania General Assembly held hearings to explore the issue. They gathered testimony that provided vivid descriptions of factory life.

One witness described how children were "summoned by the factory bell before daylight . . . had their first scanty meal at home and commence[d] work at six o'clock in the morning and continue[d] until eight o'clock at night with nothing but [a] recess of forty-five minutes to get their dinner. Many of them have to travel a mile or more to their homes." Others confirmed that punishment for "bad work and inattention" included whippings with a strap, slapping, ear pulling, and withholding of wages. One factory manager testified that most children at his facility were nine or ten years old, though he had



had applicants as young as seven. More than one factory owner testified that it was often desperate parents or orphanages who pushed children into employment. Several argued that child labor added very little to their profit margins, thus constituting “charity.” While several owners testified that they did not think that laboring conditions for children were excessive, some indicated support for legislative age restrictions. Finally, physician John Bullick confirmed the general poor health of textile factory children, observing that many had lost limbs or were killed by factory machinery.

In 1849 Pennsylvania became one of the few pioneering states to address the issue by restricting children to ten hours of work per day and sixty per week. Children under twelve were also prohibited from working in textile factories, while those under sixteen were permitted to work provided that they attended school for three months each year. But the law was poorly enforced and child labor continued to spread.

To maintain desperately needed income, some parents exaggerated the age of their children. During and after the Civil War, boys and girls in their early teens produced ammunition at the United States Army’s Frankford Arsenal in Philadelphia. Children were also employed at eating, drinking, and entertainment establishments in bustling towns across the state. They also continued to work in agriculture. The General Assembly responded with a law in 1868 limiting the work day to eight hours. However, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, new industries provided novel and dangerous avenues for child labor.



*Breaker boys stand outside a colliery in Lackawana County (PHMC Bureau of Archives and History)*

By the 1870s, coal mining was the state’s leading industry. “Breaker boys,” sometimes as young as seven or eight, sorted coal from rock for ten to twelve hours per day in massive above-ground collieries. Older boys secured underground jobs manning ventilation doors or tending to mules. One observer noted that “many of them [breaker boys] fall into machinery and are mangled. Of all the

deaths in this risky business, the death of one of these boys is the saddest. To witness a funeral procession of a boy hardly in his teens and the cortege made up of his companions in the breaker is a sight sad enough to melt a heart of stone.” In the same decade, Pittsburgh’s glass industry provided employment to youngsters which exposed them to temperatures of 100 to 130 degrees.

Pennsylvania’s 1870 census reported that 11,000 children worked in mining and manufacturing. A decade later that number had more than doubled. The 1870 census also reported that 28,000 children worked in agriculture, services, and other trades. By 1880 the number topped 37,000.

In 1876, protest against child labor took place in Philadelphia where reformers rallied for mandatory minimum age legislation. By 1879 the General Assembly imposed fines on employers who employed children in dance halls, saloons, houses of prostitution, and public exhibitions, such as the circus. An 1885 law prohibited boys under fourteen and girls of any age from working inside a coal mine. In 1887, the legislature mandated a minimum age of twelve for any type of employment in coal mines, mills, and factories. Enforcement of the new statutes was still problematic.



In the anthracite region, parents lied about their children's age. Similar practices could be found in other industries. For some, the state's legislative remedies didn't go far enough. One critic pointed out that "year after year the legislature has been begged to raise the age limit for employment to sixteen years, and always is the lobby powerful enough to continue its unholy purchase of children's lives for a weekly pittance." One factory owner admitted that "much of the prosperity of Pennsylvania is owing to the fact that she has a lower age limit than any of her neighbors."

In 1889 an Office of Factory Inspection was created to monitor the safety of industries and check for violations of child labor law. When Chief Factory Inspector John Campbell complained that he had



*This doffer girl's vacant look was captured by Lewis Hine in 1909. (George Eastman House)*

insufficient resources, he received an expanded budget to hire twenty deputy inspectors. To further discourage child labor, in 1895 the General Assembly enacted a Compulsory Education Act mandating that children between eight and thirteen years old attend school for at least four months per year.

Despite these efforts, by the dawn of the new century Pennsylvania led the nation in the number of

working children. The factory inspector reported in 1902 that 17,000 girls between thirteen and sixteen worked in silk, textile and other manufacturing. In mining and manufacturing alone, nearly 60,000 children were employed. When combined with those working in agriculture and other trades, over 120,000 children worked.

Public outcries against child labor emerged from many upper, middle, and laboring class interests. The 1902 Anthracite Coal Strike Commission heard testimony from underage silk and textile factory girls who earned as little as three cents per hour and worked twelve or more hours per day. In July, 1903, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, a widely known activist, rallied two hundred adults and children from Philadelphia's

Kensington Mill district to a march to President Theodore Roosevelt's vacation retreat outside of Manhattan. Though the march was officially ignored by the president, it brought important attention to the issue. Organizations lobbying for change included the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty; the National and Pennsylvania Child Labor Committees; the Women's Christian Temperance Union; the Philadelphia and Allegheny County Civic Clubs; the Public Education Association of Philadelphia; and the United Mine Workers of America.

(The NCLC hired photographer Lewis W. Hine to document the horrible conditions under

which children worked.)

In 1903 the General Assembly enacted a law prohibiting boys younger than eighteen years old from working in mines. The law was later declared unconstitutional. A 1905 law raised the minimum age for factory and mine work to fourteen, prohibited most night work for children, and included penalties for the falsification of a child's age. A Department of Factory Inspection was created to oversee enforcement. By 1909, the law was expanded to limit a child's work day





*Their small hands enabled breaker boys to swiftly sort and size coal in collieries. Hours were long and the work was tedious and dangerous. (PHMC Bureau of Archives and History)*

to ten hours and to prohibit those less than eighteen years old from working in certain industries. A 1913 Women's Labor Law limited maximum weekly hours for women and girls to fifty-four. At nearly the same time, the Department of Labor and Industry was created to, among other things, enforce child labor laws.

In the view of some, such as activist and later governor Gifford Pinchot, these measures did not go far enough. As a result, Governor Martin Brumbaugh enacted the 1915 Pennsylvania Child Labor Law which set the minimum working age at fourteen, and permitted children to work only if they had successfully completed the sixth grade. For those permitted to work, daily and weekly hours were limited to nine and fifty-one respectively. The law forbade all night work for children and prohibited them from working in hazardous industries. By the next year, Pennsylvania's actions prompted the federal government to prohibit interstate shipment of goods made by children, though the law would later be declared unconstitutional.

The employment of children in certain industries, such as glass manufacturing, began to decline. Yet children continued to work in silk mills and around coal mines. Onetime breaker boy John Glabis from Schuylkill County, admitted that he had

no choice but to break the law. "I started work in 1917 when I was ten years old. I know it was illegal. But there were eight of us in the family. My Dad was dead and somebody had to go to work." In need of family income, Helen Corbin started working at age thirteen at an ice cream parlor not far from where Glabis worked; "I worked from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. I slept there because of the hours. My salary was \$5 per month."

A 1919 federal study of child labor in the state's mining areas recommended tougher enforcement of laws. In 1925 a Bureau of Women and Children was created to monitor compliance. And, during the Great Depression, when Pennsylvania's unemployment rate soared as high as 37 percent, Governor George Earle signed a 1935 law raising the minimum working age to sixteen, establishing an eight-hour day and forty-four hour week for those between ages sixteen and eighteen, and barring those under twenty-one years of age from certain dangerous occupations.

Today, the laws of 1915 and 1935 are central to the Department of Labor and Industry's regulation of child labor. Amendments have permitted fourteen and fifteen year olds to work up to four hours per day and eighteen hours per week during the school year. Work is prohibited between 7:00 P.M.



*In 1910, Lewis Hine photographed this doffer at a spinning mill in Tennessee. (National Archives)*

and 7:00 A.M. during a school week and, in the summer, from 10:00 P.M. to 7:00 A.M. Sixteen and seventeen year olds are permitted to work eight hours per day and up to twenty-eight hours per week during a school week. They may work additional hours on weekends. Night work is permitted

only during summer vacation periods. Young people are prohibited from working in manufacturing or mechanical occupations as well as establishments which produce or sell alcoholic beverages. The law also requires that they earn the minimum wage.

As of May, 1998, Pennsylvania had over 5.4 million nonagricultural jobs—a near record high—including about 302,000 working individuals between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. Technology and new industries have created novel arenas for child labor. The arts and entertainment now employ significant numbers of children who must be at least seven years old. Infants are also permitted to work in television commercials and motion pictures. In these cases special permits must be obtained from the Department. Major employers of children today also include fast-food restaurants and retail stores. During the summer months parks and community swimming pools employ large numbers of young people. Many young people volunteer as junior firefighters and rescue or forest fire crews. In all of these cases, the state's child labor laws apply.

Migrant or seasonal farm workers travel to the Commonwealth to work on farms and in mushroom houses and nurseries. The workers may come as an entire family, including children. Children of seasonal farm workers may work in agriculture when they are fourteen years old and must adhere to the hourly limitations and other provisions of the state's child labor laws. A Seasonal Farm Labor Law prohibits the employment of children during normal school hours as well.

Declines in dangerous and sometimes abusive forms of child labor are tied to many causes. Legislation played a key role as did social pressure which made it more appropriate to educate children. Efforts by the Department of Labor and Industry to enforce Child Labor Laws, investigate complaints, and educate the public, employers, and workers have



been important. Economic shifts have played a role. For example, as more women entered Pennsylvania's silk mills in the 1920s and 1930s, there was less demand for child labor. And, as coal mines gradually disappeared from the state, fewer children worked there as well.

The story of child labor and its reforms illustrates how public policies emerge because people identify and advocate for issues of importance. Voices representing the many different sides of such issues

play an important role in the development of the laws and traditions by which we live today. The history of child labor and its reforms in Pennsylvania provides key insight as to where we are today as a state and a society.



For additional information on Pennsylvania's Child Labor Law, call the Department of Labor and Industry at 1-800-932-0665 or e-mail [www.dli.state.pa.us](http://www.dli.state.pa.us)

## For Further Reading

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